Preston Hollow Presbyterian Church
To Be A Christian
Matthew 16:13-20, 24-26
September 9, 2014
John Buchanan

This sermon began in what, for me, has become over the years a sacred place and a sacred time: sitting in a rocking chair on the porch of a beach house looking out over the Atlantic Ocean. It is a good place for thinking, pondering, reading, praying. It also seems almost to invite thoughtful conversation about important matters. This sermon grew out of one such conversation in that place. A granddaughter, a college senior — one who, in fact, grew up in this congregation — was thinking about big and important things, as you do when you are a senior in college and facing the imminent rest of your life. She sat in the rocking

chair next to mine and we talked about the mystery of creation, the wide beautiful world stretched out in front of us, the stunning night sky full of stars, the infinity of space. We talked about creation, evolution, how we came to be here. We talked about the mystery of humanity, about politics and peace and war and justice and injustice. We talked about Christianity, what it is and what it is not and how much of what the world sees of Christianity is not very attractive, embarrassing on occasion. She asked a lot of great questions, none better than the one that gave birth to this sermon: “What about Jesus, Granddaddy?”

Well, what about Jesus?

There are more books on the topics than any other, more books about Jesus than anyone else in history. It isn't even close. More than 2.2 billion people claim to follow him, believe in him. But, it is more than believing ideas about him.

Greg Garrett, who teaches English at Baylor, remembers inviting the late Maya Angelou to lecture to his class one time. After the class he tried to thank her and said: "And to think, you're a Christian." "She took my hand, looked at me, a gentle smile broke across her face, and she shook her head. 'Oh, honey,' she said in that deep rich, resonant voice, 'I'm not a Christian. I'm trying to be a Christian.'" [The Other Jesus, pp. 11-12]

Bono, the rock star and leader of U2, social activist and Christian, was asked about Jesus one time. His answer is classic and reminiscent of something C.S. Lewis also said a generation ago. “Jesus isn’t letting you off the hook…you’re left with a challenge, which is either he was who he said he was, or he was a complete and utter nut case…You have to make a choice.”

What about Jesus? What does he heave to do with being a Christian?

I keep in my files something Joseph Sittler once said about him. Sittler was an elegant and elite theologian but he could also be deeply personal. He said, “As I tried to discern the tangled history of my own coming to Christian faith, my whole life

has been haunted by the reality of Jesus. I find that despite all the scholarship that has taken place from my seminary days to the present moment, there is no abatement in the power of the haunting allure of the figure of Jesus." I keep that quote handy because what Sittler said about Jesus is true for me as well.

There is a widespread phenomenon today of admiration for and interest in Jesus – but antipathy toward the Christian religion and the Christian church. Martin Marty says: "There is a great company of nonbelievers, secular humanists who admire Jesus but don't believe he was divine… Their patriarch is Thomas Jefferson." Professor Garrett finds the same thing in his Baylor students

who are fascinated by Jesus but turned off by what they see of Christianity and the Church in the media.

I cringe too when I read about my religion described as narrow, mean, judgmental, anti-intellectual, anti-science. I cringe when Christianity is characterized in the media as anti this, anti that – anti-reproductive rights, anti-evolution, anti-equal rights, anti-gay marriage. I cringe when the media simply assumes that there is only one Christian position on these issues: anti. I think Jesus would cringe as well.

In the middle of the story – a three-year period that began when he is thirty years old, in his hometown of Nazareth, and continues through the

villages and towns of Galilee – where he teaches in synagogues and on hillsides and from fishing boats, heals the sick and everywhere he goes challenges religious and social convention by welcoming women and children, associating with people who are regarded and outcast and called unclean, untouchable, sinners, until he comes at last to the capital city, Jerusalem, where in the space of five short days he is arrested, put on trial and executed by the Romans as a disturber of the peace. Two days after that some of his followers start to say that they have seen him, talked with him, even eaten with him; that he is alive, risen from the dead and has appointed them to live their lives in the world as he told them to live, in love

and justice and compassion and forgiveness, and to tell his story to everyone – in the middle of the story there is a pivotal, critical incident.

He and his friends are walking on a dirt road from village to village, and pretty much out of the blue he says: “By the way, what are people saying about me? Who do people think I am?” “Funny you should ask,” they say, “We’ve talked to people who think you are John the Baptist,” his cousin with whom he was often identified. “Other people think you sound a lot like one of the old prophets, that maybe Elijah has returned.” “What do you think?” he asks. “Who do you say I am?” What a moment that must have been. I’ve always imagined them stopping walking at that point, standing in a kind

of semicircle, in silence, no one saying a word, thinking, maybe looking off into the distance at the sun shining on a field of ripe grain, or a shepherd tending his sheep on a hillside. I think there was a long, pregnant silence before Peter said – maybe tentatively – although Peter was not a tentative man, but he knew this was the most important question he had ever been asked – slowly, deliberately – "You are the Messiah, the promised one, the one we have been waiting for – the Christ, the Son of the living God."

That is the heart of the story of Jesus. It has always intrigued me – with its simple power, its existential crisis, its precipitous forcing of decision…I chose that passage to write my senior

paper on in Divinity School. I studied Matthew 16:13-20 as I never studied anything before or since. I could read it in Greek. I knew what every authority in history said about it. I explored it from the perspective of culture, politics, economics and history. I got an A on my paper, graduated, and when I was invited to preach in my home church on the first Sunday after graduation and ordination, I decided to use my paper, forty pages long, bristling with footnotes, as the basis for my first official sermon. My father was very excited about my appearance in the pulpit of our church. I know now that he was as nervous as I was, hoping I didn't say anything embarrassing. My grandparents came, aunts and uncles were there.

Some of my old high school friends showed up, still not quite believing that I had become a minister. Our devout Baptist next-door neighbors did the unthinkable, missed their own church to hear me preach. Dad threatened to stand outside the church and sell peanuts and popcorn and autographed church bulletins.

So, amidst great nervousness and stress I did it – laid on the congregation my scholarly insights, quoting extensively from antiquity and modern scholarship, using lots of big words like existential, hermeneutic, and epistemological. Somehow we survived the morning. The people of the congregation were gracious and forgiving and said all the right things. Magdalene Bair, a junior

high teacher with whom I had some unpleasantness, and who seemed to me had a permanent scowl on her face, shook my hand and said, “You’re still talking too much, and too fast,” gave me a little smile and a pat.

Afterward there was a brunch at home, and when all the guests had left my father and I sat in the living room talking. He said something that has stayed with me over the years, perhaps the best insight ever about this text. He said, “You told us what everybody in history thinks. The next time, leave a little time at the end for what you think.”

That is the issue: “What do you think? Who do you say that I am?”

After thinking about the incident for four decades, I have concluded that it is a mistake to stop with Peter's confession. I now understand that the dramatic incident is just the first half of a large narrative and ought not to be chopped up. Who Jesus is – is the first part, the human necessity of personally coming to terms with him and who he is. But the story doesn't stop there. In fact there is an internal momentum. Jesus kept on talking after Peter says, "You are the Christ, the son of the living God." They're still standing there in the middle of the road and he says, "If what Peter said about me is true and you, in any way, agree with him – there will be difficult time ahead: troubles, conflict, maybe even persecution and suffering."

Then comes the second part of this incident: “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it.”

You see, if the incident ends with Peter’s confession – “You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God” – you might conclude that being a Christian is a matter of believing things about Jesus. You might conclude that being a Christian is a matter of believing certain ideas to be true, trusting and affirming concepts and words in creeds and books of theology. And that is exactly what has happened to Christianity over the years.

It has come to mean believing a set of ideas – that Jesus was the Son of God, that he was born of the Virgin Mary, that he is the eternal Christ. Please understand that the Christian intellectual project is magnificent. It has occupied our very best minds for centuries. In a sense it defines Western Civilization – what used to be called Christendom. The result, however, is that Christianity has come to mean a set of ideas or propositions.

Hans Kung, Roman Catholic theologian and one of the most influential Christian thinkers of our generation comments on the Church's total investment in establishing and maintaining at all costs right beliefs, theological orthodoxy, rooting out heresy. The church concluded that believing

correct ideas was so central that it was all right to torture and burn people at the stake people for espousing wrong ideas and thinking heretical thoughts.

Kung infuriates the hierarchy by simply pointing out that “Jesus never questioned anyone about the true faith; never asked anyone to recite a creed or profess orthodoxy. He expects no theological inflection,” Kung says. He does “expect an urgent practical discussion.”

For saying things like that Kung has lost the Vatican stamp of approval and is no longer to be regarded as a “Catholic Theologian.” Another Catholic thinker who is always worth reading, Richard Rohr, said recently, “Jesus said, ‘Follow

me.’ But we avoid that, making the message into something he never said: ‘Worship me.’ Worship of Jesus is harmless and risk-free, actually following Jesus changes everything.”

So – can you be a Christian if you don’t know exactly what you believe? Is it all right to join the church if you don’t have your personal theology all worked out? Of course. There are people in every congregation I have been privileged to serve who are uncertain about the finer points of Christian theology, but who are compelled by Jesus and who want, with everything in them, to be his followers.

Jesus himself accepts that, invites that. As far as I know he never said, “Believe these five things about me.” He did say: Follow me. If you would be

a Christian listen to me. Do what I do. Pick up a cross. Pick up a burden. Pick up a challenge, a mission, a project that needs doing – and follow along. Open your heart, give it away – your passion, your time, your resources, your love – and you will be totally and fully alive.

Of course it matters what you believe. But how you live, how you follow him in your life, matters just as much, maybe more.

Before they knew who he was the disciples decided to follow him. That is how it is with faith. First you decide to follow him, to be a Christian, then, slowly, gradually, you learn who he is. Albert Schweitzer wrote beautifully:

"He comes to us as one unknown, without a name, as of old by the lakeside, he came to those men who knew him not. He speaks to us the same words, ‘Follow thou me!’ and sets us to the tasks which he has to fulfill for our time. He commands. And to those who obey him, whether they be wise or simple, he will reveal himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings which they shall pass through in his fellowship, and, as an ineffable mystery, they shall learn in their own experience who he is." (The Quest for the Historical Jesus)

[optional]

Leave some time at the end for what you think, Dad said.

So here is what I think –

Jesus was the Word of God incarnate – he is what God has to say to us about who God is and who we are created to be. Jesus shows me what God is like, what is ultimately and forever true.

that love is more powerful than hate

that compassion is more true than indifference and forgiveness more real than revenge

that God's love for us is unconditional and inclusive: includes us all, regardless of who we are

and because of that every human being is precious in God's sight and deserving of my respect and care.

Jesus showed in his own life, his death on the cross and his resurrection that if you really want to live to be fully and completely all that you were created to be, you have to find some way to give your life away.

And Jesus shows me that there is nowhere I can go or nothing that can happen to me that will separate me from God and God's love, not even death.

As I try to articulate who Jesus was and is, my personal response and personal beliefs, I have never been able to improve on lines from a hymn I sang in childhood – Fairest Lord Jesus:

Thee will I cherish
Thee will I honor

Thou my soul’s

Glory, joy, and crown